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ABSTRACT

An aspect of the Lansing, Michigan desegregation process that is examined in this paper is the school elections which have been held since 1969. The purpose of this examination is to determine what, if any, reliable voting patterns can be found in the Lansing community relative to the desegregation process. The assumption underlying this analysis is that voter behaviors on school issues represent a concrete expression of a community's attitudes toward its schools, their policies and practices. A methodology that examines several elections simultaneously is utilized because experience with school elections indicates that the study of a single election may be misleading and extremely situational, and thus not indicative of community attitudes. The findings resulting from the voter analysis are summarized on two dimensions: (1) the proportion of eligible voters who voted in the elections and (2) the number of those voters who favored the issues as they were presented between 1969-72 and 1973-76. Among the findings is that a substantial number of voters, who in fact went to the polls for an election, did not vote one way or another on the recall. This analysis of voter behavior relative to the development and implementation of desegregation reveals interesting findings and raises a number of interesting questions. (Author/AM)

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A Symposium Titled

EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY AND QUALITY EDUCATION: THE LANSING EXPERIENCE

Voter Behavior as an Expression of Community Attitudes Toward Desegregation

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In one respect, the Lansing experience with school desegregation is not unusual. Many middle-size cities throughout the United States have encountered, or will encounter, this complex issue. In another respect, the Lansing experience is unique in that the desegregation process and resulting effects have been well documented and carefully evaluated.

My colleagues on this symposium panel have chosen to focus on various aspects of the Lansing desegregation process. For my part, I have chosen to examine the several school elections which have been held in Lansing since 1969. The purpose of this examination is to determine what, if any, reliable voting patterns can be found in the Lansing community relative to the desegregation process. The assumption underlying this analysis is that voter behaviors on school issues represent a concrete, albeit macro, expression of a community's attitudes toward its schools; their policies and practices.

The Lansing desegregation story includes a recall of a portion of the locally elected school board in November 1972. This analysis examines the millage and board elections which occured between 1969 and the 1972 recall, the recall election itself and the millage and board elections which have occured since the 1972 recall election.

The methodology which examines several elections simultaneously was utilized because experience with school elections indicates that the study of a single election may be misleading and extremely situational, and thus not indicative of community attitudes. However, when the voter behaviors from several elections are examined concurrently, specific

issues and situations will be less influential, and general community attitudes and beliefs which are less situation specific will emerge.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The specific research questions addressed in this analysis of voter behaviors on school issues are as follows:

1) Did the voters, in precincts identified as majority white, predominantly minority or naturally integrated, exhibit different voting patterns prior to the recall election, in the recall election, and in school elections held since the 1972 recall?

The recall of the five board members who favored desegregation did not result in reversal of the districts' desegregation effort because the court intervened in response to petitions from the N.A.A.C.P. A second research question is,

2) Do the voters who favored the recall and were subsequently denied their expressed preference, exhibit less positive attitudes toward the schools as reflected in their voting behavior since the recall election?

METHODOLOGY

Not all voter precincts in the Lansing School District were included in this analysis. For purposes of this analysis, several criteria were imposed before a given precinct was included in this analysis. The Lansing school system is currently organized around 92 precincts. For purposes of this analysis, 73 precincts were ultimately included. The reduction resulted because the excluded precincts did not meet one of these two criteria.

The first criteria was that the school election data for every such election since 1969 had to be available and the precinct boundaries had to remain unchanged. Second, a precinct's boundaries due to re-districting had to be in one of the three racially defined elementary school classifications (predominantly white, predominantly minority, or naturally integrated). In a few cases, voter precincts could not easily be placed in one of the three classifications because the precincts did not fall in only one of the three classifications. In those cases, the voter precincts were excluded from the analysis.

The findings resulting from the voter analysis are summarized on two dimensions; 1) the proportion of eligible voters who voted in the elections and 2) the number of those voters who favored the issues (millage) as they were presented between 1969-72 and 1973-76.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

1. Board Recall:

In November 1972, simultaneous with the Presidential election, five Lansing Board of Education members were forced by petition to stand for recall. The issue which prompted the recall was the fact that these five board members developed and voted to implement a voluntary desegregation plan in the Lansing elementary schools. All five board members were recalled and forced from office.

Table I includes the summary of voter behaviors in the recall election. The results reflect the three classifications used to describe the neighborhoods surrounding the elementary schools.

TABLE I

	Majority White precincts	Naturally Integrated precincts	Predominantly Minority precincts
Percent of registered voters voting in the 1972 election	78	74	68
Average percent of actual voters who voted on the recall issue.	85	81	76
Average percent voting to recall the five board members	64	55	43

Examination of Table I reveals several interesting findings. First, substantial numbers of voters who, in fact went to the polls for that election did not vote, one way or another, on the recall. Experience indicates that this finding in itself is not unusual since many voters who vote in city, state or national elections do not see fit to vote on school issues even when such elections are a part of the same ballot. What is surprising is that a substantial proportion of actual voters from the predominantly minority precincts did not vote on the recall issue, one way or another. These findings suggest that educators confronted with a complicated issue such as a recall ought to be concerned about the general level of voter awareness about the mechanics of such elections themselves. For example, it seems reasonable to question whether some (perhaps many) of the voters in the predominantly minority precincts believed that not voting on the recall issue at all was the same in its consequence as voting "no" on the recall issue. Further research on this question is certainly warranted.

The proportions of voters from the three precinct types who voted for the recall generally agreed with similar findings in other locations. The "majority white" precincts were most emphatic (64%) in their rejection of voluntary school desegregation. Some may find the fact that as many as 43% of the voters in the "predominantly minority" precincts also favored the recall of the Board of Education somewhat surprising. The analysis of such elections elsewhere as well as attitude studies of school desegregation suggests that this proportion is not unusual.

It is interesting to note that, whereas 74% of the registered voters went to the polls on the day of the recall election (also Presidential election) and 81% of those who voted in that election voted on the recall issue, the election of the board members to replace those recalled attracted only 17% of the registered voters. (Twenty-three percent "majority white" precincts, 15% "naturally integrated" precincts, 10% "predominantly minority" precincts).

This finding suggests that while the recall of a school board over a desegregation program usually represents a "high interest" issue, the election of replacements for such recalled members may not attract anywhere near the level of interest or voter involvement.

2. Pre Recall and Post Recall Comparisons of Voter Behavior on School Millage Issues:

Four millage elections were held between 1969 and 1972. Other school elections were held during this same period but they were confounded by other city or state issues being on the same ballot. In this analysis, such confounded school millage elections were excluded.

After the 1972 recall election and the federal court intervened in the desegregation activities of the Lansing schools, two unconfounded millage elections were conducted. Table II presents a summary and comparison

of the voter behaviors of the three precinct classifications relative to the percent voting and the percent favoring the proposed millage requests.

TABLE II

		Majority White precincts	Naturally Integrated precincts	Predominantly Minority precincts	Total
Average percent of registered voters voting	1) Pre recall	40	34	29	35
	2) Post recall	25	17	13	19
Average percent of actual voters favoring increased millage	1) Pre recall	43	44	42	42
	2) Post recall	43	42	44	44

Examination of Table II reveals some rather startling findings. The most startling finding is the dramatic drop in the average number of registered voters who voted in school millage elections subsequent to the recall of the Board of Education. There has been a reported decline in voting in all elections and in most areas of the country. However, few places have reported a 45% reduction in voters coming to the polls in recent years. This finding deserves further study in Lansing and elsewhere. The question of whether this is a nation-wide trend relative to school elections or specific to voter frustration because their quest to subvert voluntary desegregation was not realized deserves full and careful study.

Further examination of Table II reveals that even with the significant reduction in the proportion of actual voters, those who did vote did not tend to be any more or less positive toward school millage issues. This conclusion is based on a comparison of the voter's post recall voting averages supporting millage issues after the recall to their pre-recall voting behaviors.

SUMMARY

This analysis of voter behaviors in Lansing relative to the development and implementation of a desegregation reveals several interesting findings and raises an equal number of interesting questions. These data clearly call for additional study if we as educators are ever to understand community attitudes and behaviors as they face controversial issues and problems, generally, and in education specifically.